

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

Decision Record - Memorandum
Absaroka Front Vegetation Treatments

May 2016

PREPARING OFFICE

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Worland Field Office



Decision Record - Memorandum

Absaroka Front Vegetation Treatments

DECISION

It is my decision to approve the Absaroka Front Vegetation Treatments described as Proposed Action of Environmental Assessment No. DOI-BLM-WY-R010-2015-0032-EA. This decision will utilize prescribed fire and mechanical treatments on approximately 12,194 acres of sagebrush uplands, riparian areas, and aspen clones and will utilized just mechanical treatments on another 9,503 acres of riparian areas. These treatments will reduce conifer encroachment, increase and/or maintain rangeland health, and improve wildlife habitat quality on the east slope foothills of the Absaroka Mountains in Wyoming. The Proposed Action includes design features to accomplish the proposed project while minimizing impacts to cultural, wildlife, forest, vegetation, safety, structure protection, riparian/wetlands, invasive/non-native species, paleontology, and livestock grazing resources.

Authorities:

NEPA (42 U.S.C. §§ 4321- – 4347), as amended

Title V of FLPMA, Sec. 501. [43 U.S.C. 1761]

Absaroka Front Habitat Management Plan (HMP), April 1986

Public Rangelands Improvement Act, 1978

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act, 2003

Mitigation and Monitoring:

Baseline established photo points and point/line intercept transects would be used to document the vegetation change/trend in the project area to determine whether objectives are met or appropriate progress towards achieving objectives is occurring.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY

This plan has been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms to the land use plan as required by 43 CFR 1610.5. The proposed action conforms to the Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan for the Worland Field Office, dated September 21, 2015. The decisions in the Worland Resource Management Plan (WRMP) provide general management direction and allocation of uses and resources on the public lands in the area.

Record 3010 - Cooperate with other agencies and landowners to conduct landscape treatments, resulting in enhanced fuels management and/or restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems.

Record 3015 - Utilize wildland fires (wildfires managed for resource benefit and prescribed fires) and other vegetation treatments to restore fire-adapted ecosystems, reduce hazardous fuels, and accomplish resource management objectives.

Record 3016 - Use mechanical, chemical, and biological treatments across the landscape as needed to restore vegetative diversity and reduce the risk of unnatural fire within those ecosystems.

Record 4014 - Actively promote aspen regeneration throughout the planning area using a variety of vegetation treatments and natural processes.

Record 4021 - Perform treatments in all woodland types, including but not limited to juniper, aspen, cottonwood, and ponderosa, limber, and whitebark pine woodlands.

Record 4023 - Manage conifer encroachment to improve wildlife habitat and forest health conditions as well as make progress toward potential natural communities, as determined by the site's ESD.

Record 4027 - Manage native plant communities in accordance with *Wyoming Standards for Healthy Rangelands* (BLM 1997). Use ESDs and other available information, resource objectives established in this RMP, and specific management practices to maintain or achieve the standards.

Record 4030 - Manage to maintain contiguous blocks of native plant communities and minimize fragmentation; allow for appropriate mosaic of interrelated plant communities while allowing for other resource uses.

Record 4058 - Maintain or improve important wildlife habitats through vegetative manipulations, habitat improvement projects, livestock grazing strategies and the application of *The Wyoming Guidelines for Managing Sagebrush Communities with Emphasis on Fire Management* (Wyoming Interagency Vegetation Committee 2002) and the *Wyoming BLM Standard Mitigation Guidelines for Surface-Disturbing and Disruptive Activities* (Appendix F, *Wyoming Bureau of Land Management Mitigation Guidelines for Surface-Disturbing and Disruptive Activities* (p. 351)), BMPs (Appendix C, *Required Design Features and Best Management Practices* (p. 251)), and similar guidance updated over time.

Record 4059 - Continue to implement the following existing HMPs and update as necessary to include management objectives and prescriptions for wildlife: West Slope HMP, Bighorn River HMP, and Absaroka Front HMP.

Record 4070 - Conduct habitat enhancement vegetation treatments within sagebrush communities as opportunities and funding allow, consistent with EO 2015-4 (Wyoming Office of the Governor 2015).

Record 4072 - Conduct vegetation treatments within aspen stands for wildlife values as opportunities and funding allow.

Record 4093 - Manage vegetation composition diversity and structure, as determined by ESD, or other methods that reference site potential, and WGFD protocols to achieve Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management objectives, in cooperation with stakeholders.

Record 4094 - Maintain sagebrush and understory diversity (relative to ecological site description) in crucial seasonal Greater Sage-Grouse habitats unless such removal is necessary to achieve Greater Sage-Grouse habitat management objectives. For example, thinning small patches of dense sagebrush may increase desirable forbs in early brood-rearing habitat.

Record 4099 - In cooperation with stakeholders, manage to promote the growth and persistence of native shrubs, grasses, and forbs needed by Greater Sage-Grouse for seasonal food and concealment.

Record 4101 - Conduct fire management activities to minimize overall wildfire size and frequency in sagebrush plant communities where Greater Sage-Grouse habitat objectives are at risk.

General priorities for habitat protection:

Priority # 1 – Protection of Greater Sage-Grouse PHMAs.

Priority # 2 – Wyoming big sagebrush communities outside Greater Sage-Grouse PHMAs and habitats recovering from disturbance within or adjacent to Greater Sage-Grouse PHMAs.

Record 4101 - Reintroduce appropriate fire regimes to limit conifer encroachment into the sagebrush plant communities. Take into account invasive herbaceous species and Fire Regime Group and FRCC (measure of departure from historic fire regime) with treatments. Where possible, achieve a balance between treating areas that have significantly departed from the historic fire regime (Condition Class 3) and areas that are functioning within an appropriate fire regime (Condition Class 1).

Record 4105 - Remove conifers encroaching into sagebrush habitats in a manner that considers tribal and cultural values. Prioritize treatments closest to occupied Greater Sage-Grouse habitats and near occupied leks, and where juniper encroachment is phase 1 or phase 2 as defined in Miller et al. (2005). Refine the location of specific priority areas to be treated by utilizing site-specific analysis and principles like those included in the FIAT report (Chambers et. al. [2014]) and other ongoing modeling efforts to address conifer encroachment.

Record 6212 - Design range improvement projects, including vegetation treatments, to meet multiple-use objectives, mitigate impacts to other resource values, and meet allotment management objectives.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

No Action – A no action alternative was considered to provide a full range of alternatives and to provide comparisons. The No Action alternative would be to not perform the vegetation treatments. Under the No Action alternative vegetation would have been unchanged and remain in its current state.

Proposed Action - prescribed fire and mechanical treatments on approximately 12,194 acres of sagebrush uplands, riparian areas, and aspen clones and will utilized just mechanical treatments on another 9,503 acres of riparian areas. These treatments will reduce conifer encroachment, increase and/or maintain rangeland health, and improve wildlife habitat quality on the east slope foothills of the Absaroka Mountains in Wyoming.

RATIONALE FOR DECISION

The Proposed Action was selected to meet BLM's responsibility to manage public lands so that they meet Rangeland Health Standards as described in 43 CFR 4180, to reduce hazardous fuels as described in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003, and to prevent unnecessary and undue degradation as described in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. This alternative would also meet the objectives of the Absaroka Front Habitat Management Plan and would lead to an increase in rangeland health and habitat quality while also decreasing the risk of large wildfire and subsequent threat to public/firefighter safety.

The No Action alternative was not selected because it would increase the risk of large wildfires, decrease rangeland health and habitat quality, and not meet policy requirements.

This project does not need to have a Density Disturbance Calculation done for it because the project will not reduce Wyoming big sagebrush cover to 15% or less in Sage Grouse Priority Habitat Management Areas.

This decision was made in conjunction with the affected grazing permittees who will abide by the Terms and Conditions.

This project was listed on the WFO NEPA register, which is available for public review. To date no comments have been received about it.

PROTEST AND APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and the enclosed Form 1842-1. If an appeal is taken your notice of appeal must be filed in this office (BLM Worland Field Office, 101 S. 23rd St, Worland, WY 82401) within 30 days from receipt of this decision. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

If you wish to file a petition (request) pursuant to regulation 43 CFR 2801.10 or 43 CFR 2881.10 for a stay (suspension) of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for a stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below.

Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1)the relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied;
- (2)the likelihood of the appellant’s success on the merits;
- (3)the likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted; and
- (4)whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

/s/ Michael J. Phillips

May 25, 2016

Worland Field Office Manager

Date

Attachments: EA #DOI-BLM-WY-R010-2015-0032-EA, FONSI